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ABSTRACT

Based upon the Mother-Infant Literacy Knowledge (MILK) program--in which imprisoned mothers are allowed to care for their children until they are one year old--a study investigated how placing parents in a print rich environment affects parental ability to provide their children with book oriented experiences. The study was conducted in a self-contained nursery section of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York's maximum security prison for women. The mothers, 17 women with an average education of eleventh grade, attended six one-hour classes on how and why to provide a print rich environment for their children, featuring videotapes, supportive books and modeling activities. After the classes ended, mothers were interviewed monthly about their literacy behaviors, and were given a book after each interview. Mothers shared books regularly with their children as part of the program, and also obtained books to read independently of the study. Both mothers and children clearly enjoyed book sharing, and mothers continued the reading activities once they returned to their communities. As a result of the program the mothers gained knowledge concerning (1) their responsibility for developing literacy in their children, (2) their ability to mediate positive change, (3) the value of literacy, (4) their own literacy skills, and (5) the improvement of reading skills. The children learned that mothers nurture the mind as well as the body, that books can be owned, and that literacy development experiences are positive. (Summaries of interviews with mothers are included.) (SKC)

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MOTHER INFANT LITERACY KNOWLEDGE

Division G Roundtable: Language and Schooling

American Educational Research Association

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Most people associate mothers and babies with a great deal of personal intimacy within the context of personal freedom. However a population is increasing in which the maternal-infant relationship is realized within a highly restrictive environment. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (BHCF) is New York's maximum security prison for women. State law permits mothers to keep their infants with them until the first birthday. The Children's Center there provides a number of parenting programs for the nursery mothers (those with children in residence). MILK: Mother--Infant Literacy Knowledge, developed by this researcher, became part of this programming.

As a parent education program, MILK grew out of a concern for those children who come to kindergarten and first grade with little or no experience with print, stories, or books, and thus find acquisition of the reading process to be quite difficult and even irrelevent. Children who readily learn to read in school without undue difficulty are typically from print rich home environments more often associated with families in which reading aloud to children is part of the middle class familial culture. Children who arrive at school with a paucity of such experience most often come from economically less advantaged homes.

As a research study, MILK took the theoretical stance that reading is a whole language process, and as such can be acquired naturally in a print rich environment, as oral language is acquired in a "talk rich" environment. Common to the experience of children who are natural readers is a print rich home environ-

ment in which they have been read to on a regular basis from an early age, and have had many children's books available and numerous opportunities to play with pencil and paper (Cohn, 1981, Forester, 1977, Teale, 1982). Case studies and descriptive research have documented the manner and sequence of development of book orientation behaviors which are typical of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who participate in literacy events on a regular basis (Bissex, 1980, Lass, 1982, 1983, Taylor, 1983, Lamme and Packer,1986).

MILK operated with the conviction that a print rich environment, thick with literacy events, need not be limited by economics or culture, that a parent's ability and inclination to provide such experiences could be developed through demonstration, discussion, and material support. MILK: Mother-Infant Literacy Knowledge was a study which investigated the effects of a parent education program on the frequency of mother-infant literacy events, and the consequent development of infant book orientation behaviors.

The study was conducted on the self-contained Nursery Unit on the second floor of the BHCF hospital. Each mother and child had a small room in which were to be found a single bed, a crib, a full size and a half size locker, and a sink. The windows had inside grills. Personal belongings, such as pictures, toys, and books were displayed. The corridors, onto which the rooms (cells) opened, were decorated with large inmate paintings of storybook characters from the books which were used in the MILK study. Common facilities included the lavatory, shower and laundry rooms, a television room, and a playroom with a rug, toys,

books, and tables for socializing or diapering. The parenting classes and the interviews with participants were conducted in the television room.

Black (7) and white (7) ethnic groups were represented almost equally among the 17 mothers who participated voluntarily in both the MILK classes and the data collection which followed; three Hispanic mothers participated, though English language facility appeared to be a decisive factor in the decision not to participate in only two cases. Seventy-six per cent of the mothers were monolingual, English speakers. The average age of the mothers was 26.76 (19-38). Fifty-eight per cent were single parents, and 64% had at least two children. Of the infants participating in the study, seven were girls and eight were boys. The average reported educational level was eleventh grade; one mother had a college degree, and two others had two or more years of college coursework before entering BHCF. (A degree granting college program was in operation on site.) Prior to incarceration they held unskilled jobs or were unemployed. (Mothers entered and left the nursery program as they approached their delivery date, were paroled, or their infants reached their first birthdays and left the facility.)

Six one-hour classes, conducted on the nursery unit, began the MILK experience. Through modeling, discussion, videotapes, book exploration, and book sharing practice (the infants were brought to the classes), the mothers learned the whys and hows of providing a print rich environment for their children. Each mother received several children's books and Trelease's The Read-

Aloud Handbook.

Session one introduced the idea of booksharing/literacy sharing with children, and provided an overview of these concepts and ideas including:

1. the crucial role of the family in promoting the development of literacy,
2. the relationship of early and continual experiences with books to later success in reading,
3. infant responsiveness to books and oral reading, reflecting pleasure and interest;
4. maternal-infant bonding through shared literacy events,
5. effective procedures for sharing books,
6. identification and selection of reading materials as easy and inexpensive, and
7. meaningfulness of parent-made reading materials.

Shel Silverstein's (1964) The Giving Tree was read to the mothers to introduce the idea that they were their children's "giving trees," and books, stories, and literacy, gifts which they could share. They were asked to share their memories of being read to by parents or teachers. Most had no such memories, but the enthusiasm, of those who did remember and could talk about specific books, served as an initial validation of the purposes of the MILK classes. After providing a brief overview of session topics, each mother received a copy of The Read Aloud Handbook, and had an opportunity to look at some of the books to be featured in future sessions. Participation in the classes was open to all nursery mothers, with a certificate of completion going to those who attended five of the six sessions. (This

criterion was established in consultation with the mothers.)

Session two introduced methods of booksharing with young children through "The Lap Technique," the first of four videotapes from Mary Jett-Simpson's series "Learning to Read Begins at Home." After discussing the tape, I modeled booksharing by reading a favorite children's book to the group, a practice which was repeated in subsequent sessions. The mothers were given their own copy of Goodnight Moon by Mary Wise Brown (1947), which they read to their infants immediately.

Session three featured the videotape "Your Baby's First Books," with its discussion of nursery rhymes and durable books. Early book orientation behaviors such as looking, page turning, and babbling at print were explained. Each mother explored the many examples of these "first books," and selected one for her child's library.

Sessions four and six followed a similar format, using the videotapes "ABC and Concept Books" and "Laying Foundations for Comprehending Stories." These sessions considered preliteracy development for the toddler and preschooler as well. As in previous sessions, the mothers explored, selected, and practiced. Those mothers who had completed at least five sessions received certificates of completion. Those who chose to repeat the classes also received certificates.

Session five discussed community resources (libraries and bookstores), and featured a bookmaking session -- the most popular of the activities.

After completion of the sessions, semi-monthly comprehensive

interviews were conducted with each mother until her parole or transfer from the nursery unit. Areas covered included the frequency and duration of literacy events, descriptions of the child's developing book orientation behaviors, maternal beliefs about the value of the activities, and types of reading material which were shared. A new book was given at the end of each interview. (Although most mothers found it difficult to keep logs of literacy events, three did so for a short time.)

Mothers shared books with their infants on a regular basis, averaging four times per week (less than once per week to daily), and two times per day for the 15 mothers who read daily (1-4 times). The average length of the literacy events was 27.16 minutes (5-60 minutes), although length varied with the age of the infant (shortening as the child grew, and lengthening at bedtime). Ninety-five per cent of the mothers read during the afternoons (at "count" times) and evenings. Half of the babies regularly were read to by persons other than their mothers, e.g., grandparents, other mothers, inmate caregivers.

Some kinds of book sharing arose independent of the MILK course content. Seventy-five per cent of the mothers read aloud to their infants from their own books and periodicals. Lying beside their babies on their beds was a popular alternative to lap time, as was standing next their children's cribs. Sitting side by side, between its mother's legs, sitting in a chair or walker, and during feeding time (to keep the child focused on the bottle, rather than on distractions in the room) were other contexts for literacy events. Reading to a group of youngsters who were seated together on the playroom rug emerged as another

effective booksharing technique. Fingerplays and rhyming games were reported in 59% of the interviews, and became increasingly popular as children grew older.

The types and sequences of infant book orientation behaviors reported in case study and descriptive research were observed (Lass, 1982, 1983, Teale, 1982, Lamme and Packer, 1986). Mothers began to observe infant responses within one and one half months of first book sharing (one half to four months). Initial book awareness appeared between 3.5 and six months of age, with five to six months the norm. Some awareness of print was reported as early as five months, and was observed in most infants by eight months. Both mothers and children clearly enjoyed the booksharing, as reflected in the excitement the babies displayed as early as three months (but generally by six months), when lap, book and baby came together, and as repeatedly stated by their mothers. Changes in attention were seen as first the babies became accustomed to being read to, and then "aged," and grew too active for extended booksharing (more than five minutes at a time). Books also had the power to calm (observed in infants five months and older), as seen by the universal effect of Goodnight Moon.

Differential behaviors toward books and toys were reported by some mothers for older infants. Children in the second half of their first year recognized the routines their mothers established around book sharing, and some could indicate "yes" or "no" to the query "Want to read a book?" In one instance, a child at eleven months was able to distinguish between the read-

ing and conversational vocal cadences of her mother, when her back was to her mother, reflecting awareness of books per se. Other mothers also reported similar auditory discriminations. Specific book preferences were inferred by children's differential responses of attention and excitement, when certain familiar books were reread, and such preferences were observed in ten and eleven month olds who picked out a favorite from a group of books. On average, book preferences were reported by seven months of age, and as early as four months. Children also used books to initiate interaction with their mothers, usually by nine months, but as early as seven months. Book handling began early with page turning by 7+ months (facilitated by board books), "talking" at the pages at six months (four months for some), and pointing at pages and objects in the books by eight months, and as early as five months in several instances.

Mothers were unanimous in their enthusiasm for book sharing, and in their intentions to continue to read to their infants after the study was completed, and they were in their communities once again. Two kinds of reasons for continuing were mentioned most often: affective and literacy development. The mother's enjoyment was mentioned as often as that of the infants. The role of the literacy events in strenghtening of the mother-infant bond ("This is our time together.") was also perceived. The mothers were clearly operating with a theory of literacy development, which identified book sharing as generally beneficial, as establishing book concepts and patterns, as beginning the development of the child's self concept as a reader, and as an interested reader. Some mothers also saw book sharing as facili-

tating cognitive and language development. Only in two instances was the mother's prior experience with her own children or in her own childhood of significance in her decision to read to her child.

There were several collateral effects to the MILK project. Most mothers purchased or were given additional children's books apart from those provided by MILK, with an average increase of nine books per collection (3-25). Specific titles were requested for purchase by the researcher. Children's books were borrowed from the adult library at BHCF. Those mothers who were most consistent in reading to their children also tended to acquire more books. Increased reading to older children during visits was reported by facility staff. Mothers who took an earlier offering of the MILK parenting program served as models and motivators for those attended later classes; they were living testimonials.

MILK classes are to become part of the required parenting curriculum at BHCF, because of the perceived benefits for mothers and children. A MILK curriculum will be written for use by Children Center staff. At the suggestion of a mother (and with three mothers as the creative and production team), a slide/tape presentation, demonstrating and discussing the benefits of book sharing with infants in great detail was prepared. It featured the mothers who had participated in MILK, providing mother-infant situations with which new class participants more readily identify.

What literacy knowledge did these mothers develop?

1. Literacy and a love of reading are gifts that a parent

can give to her child. Mothers have and enhanced sense of their ability and responsibility to affect and effect literacy development.

2. The mothers see themselves as able to mediate positive change for their children through shared experiences.

3. The development of positive social behaviors, beginning with the most basic of these, mother-infant interactions, can be enhanced through literacy events.

4. Recognition of the value of literacy is heightened.

5. The mothers acquired enhanced uses of literacy in family settings.

6. Mothers feel joint ownership of their children's literate environments. "We have Dr. Seuss and...

7. Mothers rediscover themselves as literate persons.

8. Print is transformed and vivified; it acquires specific and general personal meanings.

9. Mothers may develop and refine their own reading abilities.

What literacy knowledge did the children begin to develop?

1. Mothers are nurturers of mind as well as body.

2. Books and print have positive cognitive and affective meanings.

3. With the gradual distinction of books apart from a generalized positive event, separate differential associations with print develop.

4. A sense of ownership grows with increased independent interactions with books.

5. Literacy event structures are internalized.

6. The child learns to be literate in Margaret Mead's sense of who reads what.

What literacy knowledge did the mothers and children learn relative to their interactions?

1. The reciprocal emotional relationship, bonding, is enhanced.
2. Audible-visible language, reading aloud, as well as audible language, becomes part of nurturance.
3. Literacy events are social interexchanges.
4. Life-to-text interactions are real; e.g. the extensions made from familiar objects and events in books to personal experience, such as "Louie's chair" while reading a picture book.
5. Learning can be collaborative and vicarious.
6. Literacy events, like nonprint aural/oral language events are social events (in other than formal contexts), and the social context is the one in which both literacy and oral language may most easily be acquired.
7. Social class and functional (multiple layers) literacy needn't be intertwined.

Finally, the overwhelming majority of mothers who attended the MILK sessions agreed to continue in the data collection phase of the study. They participated without any expectation of personal or material gain; they did not know that they would receive additional children's books, and no certificates were given for continuing in the study. In the course of this prosocial, even altruistic behavior, they were able to see themselves

as participants and researchers, as part of the investigative team, rather than as participants and subjects, as in the usual paradigm for corrections-based research.

SUMMARIES OF SELECTED INTERVIEWS

I. J. and her daughter, D.

(J. is 31, and the mother of four children. She completed the eleventh grade.)

D. at 3.5 months

Her mother began reading to her when she was two days old, and her first response was noted at three months. Her mother reads to her every three days fro ten to thirty minutes in the evening. D. looks at the pages, watching their turning, which she seems to enjoys. She laughs at her mother's sound effects. She grabs and mouths books. She coos, screams, laughs, echoes, and babbles at the pages. She may follow her mother's finger as it passes under the line of text. J.'s father is a model, reading to his other grandchildren, encouraging J. to do so, and bringing books on his visits. Both J. and D. enjoy the book sharing; it is their time together.

D. at 5 months

Reading is done every evening from ten to thirty minutes. J. reads her personal reading to D., and she is read to in a group with other infants. She will sometimes sit and listen; she still likes to watch the pages being turned, and can turn the thick pages of board books. She looks where her mother points on the page, and echoes her reading. When she sees a book, she "goes crazy," screaming, grabbing, and trying to eat it. When she is

given a book, she pats the pages, looks and both pages, and then scratches them. She puts toys to her mouth immediately, but looks at and opens books, before putting them to her mouth. She sometimes looks at a group of print on the page. She often tries to pick objects off the page.

D. at 8 months

J. reads to D. every other day for 15 to 35 minutes. When she does calm down when her mother reads, she will look down from her crib at the stack of her books on the floor, and will scream until she is given one. When both toys and books are in her crib, she will go through the former item by item; when she gets to a book, she will keep it. D. points at objects in books. She is able to turn pages. D. now has favorite books; the sound effects made by her mother make animal books her favorites. D. hands books to her mother.

D. at 11 months

J. reads to D. daily for 15 to 60 minutes. J. prefers wordless picture books, so that she can make up stories for D., and change them with different readings. D., an active child, listens to books at night, but not otherwise. She follows the print with her finger as she is read to. If a book has a picture of a phone, J. will say "Call Papa." D. then points to the phone, and places her hand to her ear. When given a book, D. scratches it, opens it, looks at the pages, sits as if she is really reading, and tears paper pages. As she is read to she moves her head from side to side, as if she is understanding and reading. D. tries to mimic her mother's sounds. She falls asleep, J. reads her

love stories.

II. M. and her daughter N.

(M. is 31, has two children, and has completed the eleventh grade.)

N. at 8 months

M. reads to N. four to five times per week for 60 minutes (10-15 minutes with each of five books). She began reading to her when N. was four or five months old, and she began to respond after about a month. N.'s favorite books are Goodnight Moon and Max the bear books. M. reads magazine articles about children and life in general to N. N. pays attention and remains interested, when she sits in her mother's lap, as if "caught" by her mother's reading. Her attention span has increased with age. She tries to take the book, and follows the pages as M. reads. M. talks about the pictures. When given a book, N. mouths the book, looks, holds, and mimics reading. She appears to focus on the print, babbles at the pages, and echoes her mother when she reads Goodnight Moon in particular (the "hush" words are special), and when she hears Max the bear. Favorite books quiet N. She knows when a book is opened. Her books are stored within her reach from her crib.

N. at 9.5 months

M. reads to N. twice a day for 30 minutes depending on the child's mood; if she is more responsive, she reads longer. An inmate sitter reads to N. twice a week. She responds to black and white patterns in her mother's magazines. When she holds a book, she turns the pages, listens, and points at the pictures; she mimics reading. She scans both pages and print, and tries to

pick the print from the page. N. handles books like books, i.e. differently from toys. She says "nana" to all the pictures. N. will hand books to her mother from those lined up near her crib.

N. at 12.5 months

M. reads to N. twice per week, and the sitter three times per week, each for 30 minutes. She shows increased attention and attraction to books, and points at more objects. If a book is in her crib, she will stop crying, and turn its pages. When her mother begins to read aloud, while she is playing in her crib, N. will attend to her mother; she does not do this, when she hears her mother's conversational voice. When M. points to objects in a book and names them, N. tries to say the name also. When she is being read to, having a book of her own in her hand, soothes N. The most colorful books are her favorites.

III. J. and her son M.

(J. is 24, has 3 children, and has completed the thirteenth grade. She read to all of her children, including The Hobbit.)

M. at 5.5 months

J. began reading to M. at four days, and responded at 1.5 months of age. She reads to him three times per day for 10 to 30 minutes. She has 20 children's books which she reads on a regular basis. When she allows M. to pick a book, he selects those with colors or gorillas. Formerly, when read to, M. would sit, say "ooh," and watch his mother's lips; now he beats the book and laughs. He is excited when he sees a book; he holds it up, growls, chews on it, opens it, scratches the pictures, and imitates his mother's animal sound effects.

M. at 7 months

J. reads to M. three times per day, for thirty minutes each time. An inmate sitter reads to him daily. J. shares her adult reading with M. M. recognizes his favorite books. When he sees a book, and J. says "Want to read?", he responds. When he sees J. with a book, he comes over to her, and climbs in her lap. Holding a book, M. turns it, tries to turn the pages, and pick the print from the page. He sometimes makes "happy" screams, if a book is taken from him. He is calmed, and will stop crying, if he is read to. Animal books continue to be his favorites. When M. is read to by others, he is quieter, stares at their faces, noting the different voice; his face has a "why" expression.

M. at 10 months.

J. reads to M. three times per day for 30 to 90 minutes -- until he ignores her. The sitter reads to him daily, and sometimes a friend of his mother. J. reads her Spanish language instruction books to M. He appears to be more interested in what she is actually saying, listening to the words. He looks, pats the pages, and tries to close the book. When sitting alone with a book, M. babbles, pats pages, opens and closes the book, and never tears the pages. He sometimes holds the book as his mother reads. When M. sees a book, he laughs, and goes to get it. If J. has a book, but is not near him, he stops what he is doing, and waits for her to read. When told to get a book, M. looks around, and gets one. M. no longer mouths books, though he does so with toys. M. is put to sleep by being read to.

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